A Review of the Impact of Emotional Intelligence on Second Language Acquisition

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Abstract. Emotional intelligence, as an emerging variable in the study of individual differences, has gradually entered the field of second language acquisition research in recent years. This article reviews empirical research both at home and abroad from 1995 to 2024, and summarizes the influence paths of emotional intelligence on foreign language learning from three aspects: emotional experience, learning behavior, and academic effectiveness. Research has found that emotional intelligence not only alleviates negative emotions including anxiety, burnout, and boredom, but also promotes the generation of positive emotions such as joy and pride. It indirectly promotes the use of metacognition and social strategies by enhancing the ability to regulate emotions, and strengthens the willingness to communicate and the autonomy of learning. Its prediction of academic performance has both direct effects and multiple mediating effects through emotional variables such as pleasure, anxiety, and burnout. Among them, the mediating effect of the "burnout" path is the most stable. External factors such as classroom support and teaching context will regulate the intensity and direction of the above relationship. Future research should focus on the differentiated roles of sub-dimensions of emotional intelligence, expand the exploration of mechanisms in different educational stages and online learning environments, and strengthen longitudinal tracking and teaching intervention design, providing empirical evidence for the construction of a foreign language teaching system that supports all-round development.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence; Second language acquisition; Second language acquisition emotions; Learning strategy; Willingness to communicate.

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, an important branch of psychology called positive psychology has emerged. Positive psychology focuses on the factors that drive individual and collective success and development and gradually entered the study of second language acquisition in the early 21st century. As a result, the research and practice of second language acquisition began to concentrate on the emotions of second language learning and gradually achieved a "positive shift". The research hotspot shifted from a single focus on negative emotions, mainly represented by anxiety, to a wide examination of positive emotions such as pleasure and boredom. A large number of empirical studies that have emerged subsequently have shown that the internal emotional factors of second language acquisition jointly act on learners' cognition, motivation and effectiveness. Emotional intelligence, as an individual's ability to perceive, understand, manage and utilize emotional information, is closely related to the emotions in second language learning and has increasingly attracted academic attention.

According to various related studies on emotional intelligence in the field of second language acquisition, emotional intelligence plays a multi-dimensional and multi-level positive role in the process of second language acquisition. Specifically, emotional intelligence can not only stimulate learners' pleasure in a foreign language, suppress anxiety and burnout, but also promote learners' application of efficient learning strategies, thereby enhancing the effectiveness of second language learning [1-3]. However, at present, few review articles have inventored and integrated the different influence paths of emotional intelligence in the field of second language acquisition.

In view of this, this study aims to review the main theories of emotional intelligence, sort out the relevant empirical research at home and abroad in the past two decades, clarify the influence

mechanism of emotional intelligence on second language learning emotions, learning behaviors and strategies, and learning outcomes, discuss existing problems, and provide suggestions for foreign language teaching.

2. Review of Relevant Theories

2.1. Competency Model

According to the ability model of emotional intelligence advanced by Mayer and Salvey, emotional intelligence is a series of measurable cognitive skills [4]. There are four levels of its ability branch, including perceiving and expressing emotions, applying emotions to promote thinking, analyzing the meanings and changes of emotions, and reflexively regulating emotions. Focusing on the tendency of ability development, this model uses the "maximum performance" test.

2.2. The Mixed Model

The mixed model is another model of emotional intelligence. Goleman holds that emotional intelligence encompasses cognitive abilities, personality traits and motivation, and his model involves elements like self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills [5]. Baron believed that the concept of emotion-social intelligence includes introspection, interpersonal skills, stress management, adaptability and general mood [6]. Unlike the ability model, the hybrid model assesses an individual's typical emotional and behavioral tendencies and self-beliefs through self-reporting questionnaires rather than objective abilities.

2.3. Trait Emotional Intelligence Theory

Under the framework of the hybrid model, trait emotional intelligence was proposed. Petrides and Furnham argued that trait emotional intelligence is a personality construct, encompassing multiple aspects such as emotion perception, regulation, expression, and utilization, integrating a series of individual behavioral tendencies and self-perception [7]. Using the self-reporting scale as well, trait Emotional intelligence measures the feelings, thoughts and behaviors that individuals typically use in their daily lives.

3. Review of Empirical Research

This paper reviews empirical studies at home and abroad from 1995 to 2024. With keywords such as "emotional intelligence", "Emotion acquired in Second Language", "learning strategies", and "communication willingness", it conducts searches in Chinese and foreign databases such as CNKI, Web of Science, and Scopus, and initially obtains 1,286 literatures. After screening based on the following criteria, 16 core papers were finally included: (1) The research type was empirical (content-based investigation, experimental research), and pure theoretical review and speculative articles were excluded; (2) The research subjects on second language learners, excluding native language learning or research in other academic fields. (3) Clearly define the variables related to measuring emotional intelligence and second language acquisition (such as emotion, strategy, performance, etc.) and exclude literature with unclear variable associations; (4) Publish in core journals or SSCI/ SCI-indexed journals to ensure research quality."

3.1. The Influence of Emotional Intelligence on the Emotion of Second Language Acquisition

3.1.1. Emotional intelligence can alleviate the negative emotions in second language acquisition

Existing empirical research (based on samples of Chinese learners) shows that emotional intelligence is stably negatively correlated with negative emotions in second language learning. Yu Weihua et al. found in their research on college students that the higher the level of emotional

intelligence, the lower the score of foreign language learning anxiety, and this negative correlation was more significant in output-oriented skills learning scenarios such as listening and speaking [8].

3.1.2. Emotional intelligence can stimulate positive emotions in second language acquisition

Emotional intelligence not only alleviates negative emotions but also enhances positive emotional experiences. Li Chengchen found that trait emotional intelligence is significantly positively correlated with foreign language pleasure [9]. Resnik and Dewaele also pointed out that students with high emotional intelligence experience higher levels of pleasure in both native and foreign language classes [10]. This result indicates that emotional intelligence plays a significant role in stimulating learning motivation and maintaining positive emotions.

3.1.3. The complexity of emotional interaction

Limited research based on Chinese learners reveals that the predictive power of emotional intelligence for different types of emotions varies. Chen Zhuo et al. found in their research on non-English major students in colleges and universities that the predictive explanatory power of emotional intelligence for anxiety was significantly higher than that for pleasure [1]. Further analysis of the sub-dimensions reveals that the "happiness" sub-dimension is only positively correlated with pleasure, the "emotion regulation" sub-dimension is only negatively correlated with anxiety, and the "emotion perception" sub-dimension has no significant predictive effect on either emotion. This suggests that the functional differentiation of the internal structure of emotional intelligence needs to be discussed in combination with specific emotion types.

3.2. The Influence of Emotional Intelligence on Second Language Acquisition Behaviors and Strategies

Emotional intelligence influences learning behavior in three key ways: by enhancing the use of higher-order strategies, boosting communication motivation, and improving learning autonomy.

3.2.1. Emotional intelligence facilitates the application of advanced learning strategies.

Wei Xiaobao and his colleagues found that emotional intelligence not only predicts communication willingness directly, but also exerts an indirect impact on it by strengthening the perception of pleasure and shaping positive language thinking patterns [11]. Fan Yumei et al. has a study on junior high school students added context: for this age group, foreign language learning pleasure acts as a partial mediator between emotional intelligence and communication willingness. By contrast, anxiety shows no significant mediating effect, implying that emotional mechanisms might differ across educational stages [12].

3.2.2. Emotional intelligence promotes willingness to communicate

Wei Xiaobao et al. have confirmed that emotional intelligence has a direct positive predictive effect on communication willingness, but it also operates through indirect paths [11]. For instance, it can enhance learners' sense of pleasure and shape positive language thinking to influence their willingness to interact. Fan Yumei et al. further noted that for junior high students, emotional intelligence boosts communication willingness by increasing their foreign language learning pleasure—while anxiety plays no notable mediating role in this process [12].

3.2.3. Emotional intelligence can enhance autonomy

Resnik and Dewaele found that students who possess high emotional intelligence and strong self-discipline show greater enjoyment in learning and lower levels of anxiety regardless of the teaching methods adopted [13]. This finding suggests that emotional intelligence may offer emotional support for learning autonomy. It achieves this by improving students' ability to regulate their emotions and enhance their self-management skills.

3.3. The Influence of Emotional Intelligence on Second Language Acquisition

The influence of emotional intelligence on academic performance follows a complex pathway, involving both direct effects and multiple indirect effects mediated through emotional variables and learning behaviors.

3.3.1. Indirect impact pathways of emotional intelligence on second language acquisition

Emotional variables act as the core mediators, and among all the paths, the "burnout" path demonstrates the most stable mediating effect. A number of studies conducted on Chinese students from junior high schools, senior high schools and colleges have confirmed that emotional intelligence mainly affects learning outcomes in an indirect way through emotional variables. Moreover, there are both consistent and different aspects in the mediating paths.

The mediating effect of "burnout" demonstrates the most consistent pattern. Yang Yingli et al.'s college student sample indicate that burnout significantly mediates the relationship between emotional intelligence and academic performance across various assessment metrics (written tests, oral exams) [14]. Li Chengchen's high school sample revealed significant pleasure mediation with no effect of anxiety [9]. Wang Zhen and Fan Lin's junior high school sample found that boredom mediates the entire pathway (100% mediation effect), though this stage-specific difference requires further validation [15]. Only Wei Xiaobao et al.'s university sample proposed a chain pathway: "emotional intelligence → language thinking patterns → pleasure → communication willingness → academic performance" [11].

3.3.2. Direct pathways of emotional intelligence in second language acquisition

Yang Yingli et al. found in their study on non-English major college students that emotional intelligence has a direct predictive effect on final English scores after controlling for emotional variables such as anxiety and pleasure [14]. Taheri et al. conducted a multinational sample study involving a small number ofstudents (with samples accounting for 19%), which showed that the three sub-dimensions of "interpersonal competence," "optimism," and "problem solving" were significant [16]. It is speculated that the direct effect may stem from the differential contributions of these sub-dimensions.

3.4. The Moderating Effect of Emotional Intelligence on Second Language Acquisition

Wei Xiaobao et al. discovered that classroom social environment moderates the relationship between emotional intelligence and communication willingness [11]. Wei Xiaobao et al. also found that classroom social environments moderate the link between emotional intelligence and communication willingness: in more supportive classrooms, emotional intelligence’s direct effect weakens, but its indirect “anxiety-reduction” effect becomes stronger. This aligns with the “person-situation interaction” theory—how much emotional intelligence impacts outcomes depends on the level of support in the teaching context.

3.5. Expanding the Mechanism Between Emotional Intelligence and Second Language Communication Intention

Wei Xiaobao et al. based on a large sample structural equation model proposed that emotional intelligence influences communication willingness through a chain path of language thinking mode and positive feelings [11]. They further introduced the classroom social environment as a moderating variable and found that its predictive power was stronger in low support environments. Fan Yumei et al. discovered among junior high school students that only foreign language pleasure played a mediating role, while the anxiety path was not significant, suggesting that emotional intelligence might affect communication willingness through different mechanisms at different educational stages [12]. These studies collectively expanded the theoretical model between emotional intelligence and communication willingness, providing a more detailed mechanism framework for subsequent research.

3.6. The Emotional Mediation Mechanism of Emotional Intelligence in Second Language Learning Outcomes

Li Chengchen et al. based on a sample of 1,307 high school students, for the first time constructed a multiple parallel mediation model in the field of second language, finding that emotional intelligence jointly influenced English grades through joy, anxiety, and burnout, among which the mediating effect of burnout was the strongest [9]. Yang Yingli et al. further pointed out that the cognitive reappraisal strategy plays a significant mediating role between emotional intelligence and grades, while expressive suppression has no such effect, suggesting that the choice of emotional regulation methods has a substantial impact on academic results [14]. Taheri et al. found that there is no significant correlation between the total score of emotional intelligence and second language proficiency [16]. However, its sub-dimensions - "interpersonal competence", "optimism" and "problem-solving" - are significantly related to academic performance. This suggests that future research should focus on the differential effects of the internal structure of emotional intelligence, so as to avoid the problem of "total score masking".

4. Shortage of Research

Emotional intelligence significantly influences second language learning outcomes through multiple pathways such as emotion regulation, strategy use, and behavioral tendencies. However, based on existing empirical research data (16 core papers retrieved from 1995 to 2024), current field research still faces prominent issues such as insufficient sample representativeness, limited depth of variable exploration, and monotonous research methods and contexts. Insufficient sample representativeness: Among the 16 studies, 14 were centered on Chinese college students (87.5% of the total), with only 1 involving junior high school students and 1 including a small number of Chinese international students (with Chinese accounting for only 19% of the multinational sample). Key groups such as elementary school students, vocational college students, and adult second language learners were entirely excluded. The developmental characteristics of emotional cognition in younger learners (elementary school students), the practical second language learning needs of vocational college students (such as occupational scenario communication), and the differences in self-directed learning contexts among adult learners (such as fragmented learning) may fundamentally differ from those in college students, making the existing samples insufficient to support conclusions for these groups. Limited depth of variable exploration: Among the existing studies, 12 (75%) used only the total emotional intelligence score for analysis, and only 6 attempted to explore the effects of sub-dimensions. The conclusions were scattered and lacked systematicness, indicating that the sub-dimensions of emotional intelligence exhibit "functional different" While the concept of differentiation has been proposed, current research has not conducted targeted verification of differences in second language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing). Moreover, the interaction effects between sub-dimensions have been entirely overlooked. Critical questions such as whether high optimism levels can enhance the efficiency of emotional regulation, and whether "emotional perception" moderates the relationship between "emotional regulation" and anxiety, have not been explored. The research context is limited: 14 studies focus on traditional offline classrooms, with only 4 involving online classrooms, and no systematic comparison of mechanism differences between the two contexts. Methodologically, 16 studies employ cross-sectional questionnaire surveys, while only 2 incorporate interviews or experimental designs. The lack of longitudinal tracking research prevents confirmation of causal relationships between emotional intelligence and second language acquisition variables, making it impossible to determine whether high emotional intelligence promotes pleasure or high pleasure enhances emotional intelligence.

5. Conclusion

To address the research gaps, future research prospects are: prioritizing the filling of local niche educational stage gaps in China, such as conducting studies on the correlation between emotional intelligence and second language learning among primary school students and vocational college students, to verify whether "emotional intelligence in young learners is more dependent on interest mediation"; focusing on mainstream online and blended teaching scenarios, exploring how emotional intelligence alleviates loneliness and boredom in online learning, clarifying the differences in mechanisms under different teaching contexts to avoid conclusion biases caused by single contexts. Additionally, future research should systematically explore the sub-dimensions of emotional intelligence. Building on competency models or trait models, researchers can specifically test how individual sub-dimensions—like emotional regulation, empathy, and optimism—impact second language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) differently. This will solve the "total score masking" problem; introduce potential mediating variables such as "learning resilience" and "self-efficacy", construct new paths like "emotional intelligence → learning resilience → burnout → academic performance", filling the current mechanism gaps; at the same time, through repeated experiments across multiple academic stages, clarify the differences in the school-age patterns of the mediating effects of anxiety and pleasure. Adopt a longitudinal tracking design, through repeated measurements over 1-2 academic semesters, clarify the causal sequence between emotional intelligence and second language acquisition variables; combine experimental interventions (such as short-term emotional intelligence training), compare the differences in emotions, behaviors, and academic performance between the experimental group and the control group, directly verifying the causal effect of emotional intelligence; moderately combine classroom observations and analysis of learning logs to reduce the subjective bias of self-report questionnaires, and improve the ecological validity of the research.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally, and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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